

# From Wormwood Scrubs to Russia

By JOSEPH G. O'KEEFE

**THE SPRINGING OF GEORGE BLAKE.** By Sean Bourke. Viking. 364 pages. \$7.95.

"High drama in West London tonight!" cried the BBC newscaster. "George Blake, the double agent who was serving 42 years' imprisonment for spying for the Russians, escaped from Wormwood Scrubs prison in London."

The news filled thousands of Britons with dismay on this quiet Saturday evening in 1966. Every initial indication pointed to an incursion into London by the Soviet KGB to release the prisoner.

The getaway triggered a massive search. Scotland Yard watched airports, harbors and the embassies of eastern European nations. In the aftermath, the Admiral of the Fleet, Earl Mountbatten of Burma, was appointed to head a government inquiry into prison security. A motion to censure Home Secretary Roy Jenkins was defeated in Commons. Prime Minister Harold Wilson assured the house that Blake was no longer a threat to Britain's security.

The flurry of high-level developments proved wryly amusing to Blake who followed its progress on television in a shabby flat only a short distance from the prison he had recently fled. Instead of being surrounded by a sinister Russian espionage apparatus, Blake had for confederates only a handful of Irishmen, one of whom engineered the prison break with very limited resources and for very obscure motives.

## Mailed Bomb

The architect of the getaway and the author of this volume, Sean Bourke, had met the superspy while serving a term for mailing a bomb to a policeman. When Bourke left the Scrubs, the plot for the deliverance had already been hatched. The story is spell-binding in spots, but the writer glides over some points which

are apt to pique a reader's curiosity.

At least a partial explanation for Bourke's involvement lay in Blake's popularity with fellow inmates. He was a good listener who often comforted young hoodlums driven distraught by six-month sentences.

Quietly, Bourke acquired accomplices and finances and charted his tactics. He exchanged messages with Blake by short-wave radio. A couple he identifies as Michael and Anne Reynolds gave valuable assistance.

The precise timing of Blake's escape narrowed down to a few fleeting minutes, and the author loads the climax with suspense, whether genuine or spurious. The normally quiet street outside the prison suddenly bustled with activity; a policeman appeared with a guard dog; a courting couple sat in a parked car; a group of visitors passed by on the way to a nearby hospital. Behind the high wall, Blake screamed into his radio for action.

At the very final instant, Bourke tossed a rope ladder over the wall and Blake scrambled to freedom, spraining his wrist as he did so. The two sped to a nearby hideaway.

Numerous persons befriended the fugitives, including a doctor who treated Blake's wrist. Others gave them shelter, food and money. The hideout was switched several times, but no one betrayed the two.

None of the collaborators was Communist. A contributory motive appeared to be sympathy with Blake over his 42-year-sentence, the severest in British legal history. The Irish in the plot enjoyed kicking John Bull's shins.

## A New Tack

Michael and Anne, a highly respectable-looking couple, smuggled Blake out of England, and Sean Bourke followed with a bogus passport. The two conspirators were reunited in East Berlin, but here events took new tack.

After they had moved to Moscow, Blake turned nasty, the author says. The superspy called his accomplice an Irish peasant and suggested the KGB liquidate him with a bullet. Recalling the Beria reign of terror, Bourke was convinced this was about to happen.

But even after he had sought and been refused sanctuary in the British embassy, the KGB showed unusual tolerance toward Bourke. He was given 30 pounds a week expense money and generally treated graciously. Blake's status at this point seems a trifle hazy. Both men occupied comfortable quarters by Soviet standards and traveled widely within the country as VIPs!

The Russians insisted that Bourke remain in their country for five years until the hue and cry over the escape had died down. To return to the British Isles would endanger others, the Communists contended.

But the prospect appalled Bourke and he managed to persuade his hosts to end their detention. He flew to Ireland where he is now presumably fighting extradition to England as a political prisoner. The leniency with which Kremlin anglers regarded him arouses the suspicions that he was never considered a very big fish in the espionage pool.